

Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

College Essay: Prompt #5

When my father told me that we were going bird watching, I expected to be awed by the sight of creatures sailing gracefully against a backdrop of painted skies, not by the sound of hundreds of them competing to be the best (or worst) singer in a tone-deaf choir. They weren't even flying when they came into view; they were lounging lazily in the muddy brown water.

Nevertheless, I refused to let the eight hour drive to the migrating grounds go down in memory as pointless suffering, so I continued to watch. I did see a few little scenes: two geese sleeping intertwined, a solitary flier outlined against the dusky light. Yet the wildlife refuge also required us to follow a dirt road in the car, which meant the car's sudden jerks caused periodic flashes of irritation.

I'd sunk into a lethargic daze when the car in front of us, which had stayed at a constant distance ahead, came to a dead stop. I watched as a side door slid open and a dog jumped out. The door slid closed and the car sped off.

My cheek left a cloudy smudge against the window when I lifted my head. I wondered briefly whether I had imagined the sight, but there was the dusty brown dog, its shaggy figure sharply outlined against the grass in the crisp, winter air.

Our car was now next to it – I caught a blurred glimpse of black eyes – and then past. I sat stiffly in my bewilderment, and the dog shrank out of sight before I knew it. I watched the cars ahead and behind us. One by one each car neared the dog – I held my breath – and went on past. No one stopped.

I sat back and closed my eyes. It was too late to turn back. A heavy, empty feeling tightened my chest. My fist was clenched and I forced the aching knuckles to relax. There was nothing I could do, and I cursed myself for it. *What will happen to that dog?* I imagined broken, yellow teeth bared, threatening to snap and tear into any fingers foolish enough to come close. Hackles raised, back arched, a head of matted fur turning to show the whites of an eye widened in silent warning.

I leaned toward the front to see that we were coming up to a little rest stop. My father stopped the car so we could stand up and stretch for a bit. I jumped out and winced as the glaring sunlight hit my face. White fuzzy outlines came into focus: sparse shrubbery and a few overhanging trees. I stepped forward.

I think of that dog every time I walk into the shelter. As I close the door behind me, snarls rip through the still air: a new stray. No one dares get too close. For a long time, he huddles in a corner, black eyes flashing with menace, letting out low growls whenever I move. On the other side of the metal partition, I sit quietly, head bowed, limbs loosely tucked in where he can see them. I murmur reassurances, “It’s okay, I won’t hurt you”, hum the solo melody of Astor Piazzolla’s “Oblivion.”

His eyes droop, head on paws. When I shift to place the back of my hand near the partition, he’s back on his feet in an instant, but relaxes when I stay put. He pads over slowly, claws clicking against the stone floor. I hold my breath, an eternity of trepidation compressed into two heartbeats. His ear twitches when I reach out, my hand shaking ever so slightly. The wetness of his nose briefly chills my hand. Our eyes meet and hold.